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AUTHOR Emmert, Dee E.; Koss, Mary P.
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ABSTRACT

The relationships between acquaintanceship, resistance, and perceptions of rape were examined. In a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design, subjects were presented with a description of a situation in which the woman was forced to engage in sex. Four levels of acquaintance were included. In addition, the woman either strongly resisted her assailant, or acquiesced to his demands. Subjects were asked to make judgments about the man, the woman and the rape situation. The results revealed that subjects defined rape in terms of the level of resistance evidenced by the woman. The level of acquaintance did not affect the subjects' definition of the situation as rape, although it did affect their attitudes toward prosecution of the assailant. Finally, men and women differ in their use of the acquaintance and resistance dimensions in determining the severity of a situation when coercive sex has occurred. (Author)

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EFFECT OF VICTIM-OFFENDER RELATIONSHIP AND VICTIM RESISTANCE ON ATTRIBUTIONS OF RAPE

Dee E. Emmert, Kent State University

Mary P. Koss, Kent State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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While rape is a topic of much discussion these days, reliable data on it is scarce. Very few carefully controlled studies have been done. Most of our information comes from police records. Unfortunately, police files provide a rather biased view of rape since the vast majority of rapes are never reported to the police. This is especially true when the rapist and victim are well acquainted or other situations where the victim feels she may not be believed.

Another approach to the study of rape is thru attribution theory. People attribute characteristics to others based on very little information. For example, an individual may assume that another person belongs to a given social class and holds a variety of attitudes based simply on the clothes that person is wearing. The same process occurs when a rape situation is described to a person. That person makes a variety of assumptions about the victim and assailant in an attempt to understand why the rape occurred. By systematically varying small portions of the rape description, it is possible to explore the way in which a dimension affects people's perceptions of rape.

Using this technique, a number of researchers have found that less respected women--for example, a prostitute or a topless dancer--are seen as more responsible for their rape than a married woman is. For example, Kulewitz (1977) found that a victim who

did not resist her assailant was seen as more responsible for her rape. Furthermore, Smith, Keating, Hester, and Mitchell (1976) found that a woman who was acquainted with her assailant was seen as less responsible for her rape than a woman who had never met her assailant. On the other hand, Calhoun, Selby and Warring (1976) found no significant effect for acquaintance. Both of these studies used a very low level of acquaintance--in one case the actors had met four times; in the other they had been in the same class.

The present study attempted to clarify the relationships between acquaintanceship, resistance, and perceptions of rape by expanding the range of acquaintance cosiderably. In the study, subjects were presented with a description of a situation in which the woman was forced to engage in sex. Four levels of acquaintance were included. At the lowest level of acquaintance, the victim and assailant had never met. Other levels of acquaintance were: they had met a few times, had dated a few times, or he was her steady boyfriend. In addition, the woman either strongly resisted her assailant, or "did what he told her to." In either case, he used force--thus meeting the legal definition of rape in Ohio where the study took place. Thus the study was a 2x4x2 (sex of subject x acquaintance of actors x victim resistance) factorial design. The subjects, 240 introductory psychology students, were asked to make a variety of judgments about the man, the woman and the rape situation in a 74-item questionnaire. Their responses were factor analyzed to form scale scores. These scores are more reliable than responses on single items. Then,

an analysis of variance of the factor scores was performed.

We found that resistance was a significant factor ($p<.01$) in attributing responsibility to the victim. The victim was seen as more responsible for her rape when she did not resist her assailant than when she resisted strongly. Subjects were also more certain that a rape had in fact occurred when the victim resisted strongly than when she did not ($p<.05$). However, the level of acquaintance did not significantly affect the subjects' belief ($p=.11$) that a rape had occurred. After the subjects read the definition of rape according to Ohio law, neither the level of acquaintance nor resistance affected the subjects' certainty that the situation was rape. Thus initially, subjects were using the level of resistance but not acquaintance as a defining characteristic of rape. But, when confronted with the legal definition, they were able to replace their personal definitions of rape with a standard of force in determining the legal guilt of the assailant. This suggests that people can be relatively easily educated to consider rape in terms of the force used by the assailant rather than resistance by the victim.

Even though the subjects' definition of the situation as a rape was not affected by the level of acquaintance between the victim and assailant, acquaintanceship did affect the actions they expected the victim to take following the rape ($p<.005$). The better acquainted the victim and assailant were, the more certain subjects were that the victim would not call the police, go to the hospital or take other actions which would be necessary in order to attempt to prosecute the assailant. This is of

particular importance since acquaintance was not a factor in labeling the situation as rape. This suggests that victims who know their assailant may be reluctant to report a rape to the police in spite of the fact that they label the situation rape. This suggests that special efforts may be needed to encourage women who know their assailant to report their rape to the police. These women may also have unique concerns in relation to their rape. For example, if they choose to or feel required to continue their relationship with their assailant, they may have problems with that relationship. On the other hand, an attempt to completely avoid their assailant may necessitate such drastic changes as a new job, moving, or changing colleges. They may also feel particularly ineffectual or experience a much lower sense of personal worth since the legal system has not functioned to protect them.

In addition, the level of acquaintance significantly affected how severe the situation appeared to the subjects ($p<.05$). As you can see in figure 1, the situation was seen as most stressful when the victim and assailant were moderately well acquainted. The situation was perceived as less serious when the victim and assailant had never met or when they were in a long-term, steady relationship. Apparently, up to a point the rape situation was seen as increasingly upsetting as the victim and assailant were better acquainted. However, in the context of a relationship where the victim and assailant were "steadies" coerced sex was not seen as very serious.

On the same issue, there was a three-way interaction. This was apparently due to the way in which females responded to the situation in which the female resisted. As shown in figure 2, they perceived the situation where the victim and assailant were well-acquainted as much more serious than when the victim and assailant were less well-acquainted. This is in marked contrast to the way in which other subjects responded. This suggests that, at high levels of acquaintance, females are making a distinction which males are not. Women seem to judge coerced sex as an acceptable part of an intimate relationship only if the woman does not resist. For men it appears that they are willing to accept coerced sex as acceptable behavior in an intimate relationship regardless of the woman's response.

To summarize, subjects defined rape in terms of the level of resistance evidenced by the woman, although they were capable of using a force standard when they were instructed to do so. While the level of acquaintance between the actors did not affect the subjects' definition of the situation as rape, it did affect their attitudes about attempting to prosecute the assailant. Finally, men and women differ in their use of the acquaintance and resistance dimensions in determining the severity of a situation where coerced sex has occurred.

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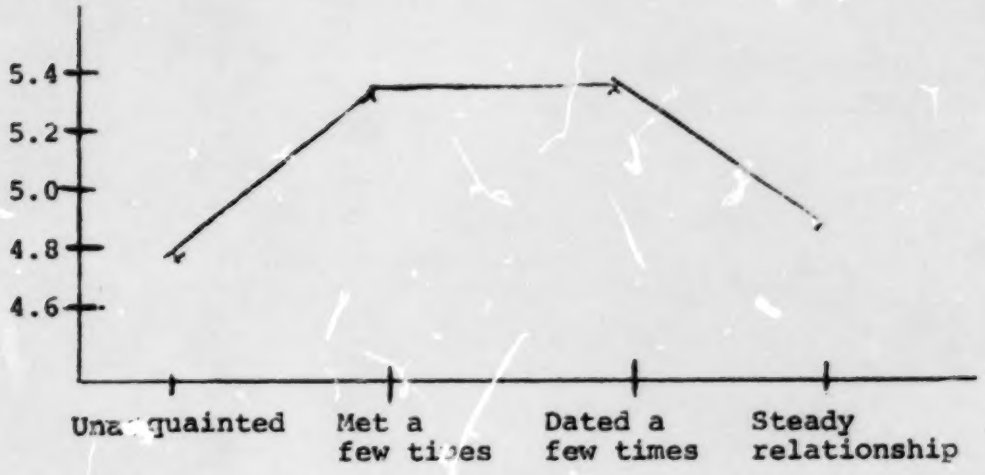
Figure 1

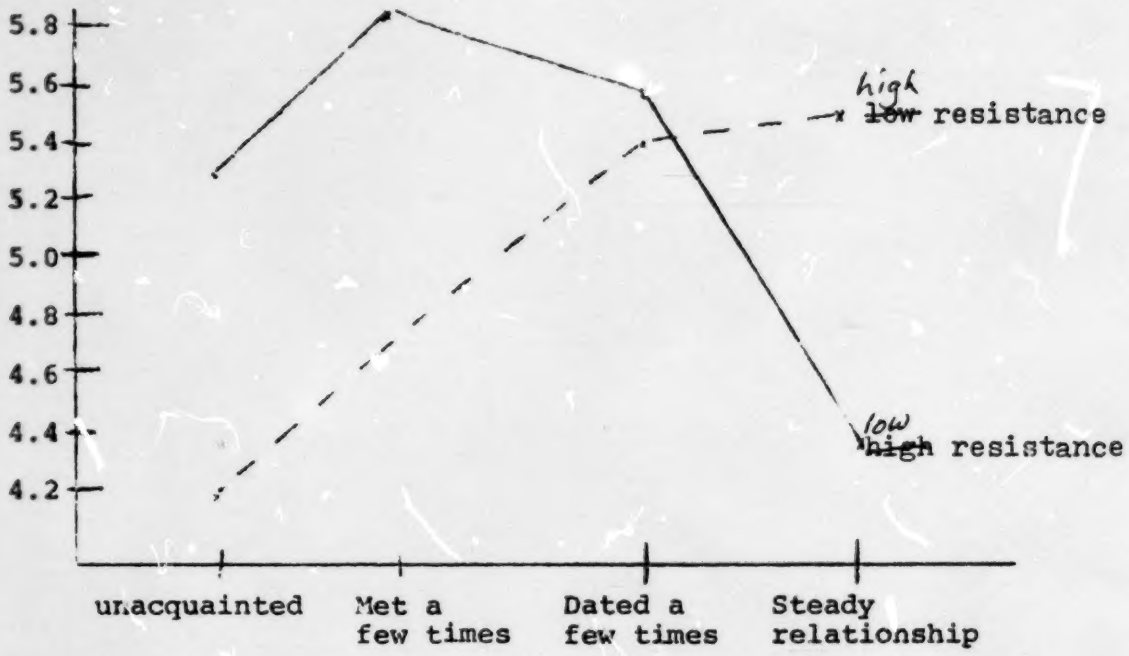
Mean factor scores for severity of the situation



Emmert, Dee and Koss, Mary P.; Department of Psychology; Kent State University; Kent, Ohio 44242

Figure 2

Mean factor scores of females for severity of the situation



Mean factor scores of males for severity of the situation